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ABSTRACT

An administrative policy adopted at the University of Washington providing an alternative to relying entirely on English language proficiency tests for determining foreign students' ability to succeed in an academic program is described. Issues from which this program evolved are discussed and the related literature is reviewed. The issues include English proficiency as a predictor of academic outcomes, institutional responsibilities in establishing foreign student policies, identifying proficiency levels, admission policy alternatives, and models for providing language services to foreign students once admitted. Following this, the University of Washington's model is outlined. This model sets a score of 500 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language as the minimum requirement for admission contingent on further assessment and a score of 580 as the requirement for admission into a full-time English-medium curriculum for both undergraduate and graduate applicants. Students with the lower score are given provisional admission status pending additional work in English as a second language (ESL). Fees are assessed for ESL courses, which do not earn credits but do count toward full-time enrollment for visa status. The incorporation of ESL classes into the academic program is felt to be essential to program success, since it helps to meet the primary needs of all constituencies without excessive financial burden on students or institution, and to eliminate the isolation of traditional intensive language institutes. Most important, this approach is designed to allow institutions to admit students based on their proven academic abilities, so that subsequent decisions can be based soundly on prior academic performance. (MSE)

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An Institutional Approach to Improving the English Proficiency of Foreign Students: The Modified Transitional Model

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The already difficult process of establishing college admissions criteria is complicated in the case of foreign students by the need for colleges and universities to evaluate whether an applicant possesses the minimum English profiency skills necessary to successfully master subject matter. The great majority of institutions currently require some evidence of English language ability for applicants from non-English speaking countries, usually assessed at the time of application by achievement of a minimum score on such tests as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP).

In determining what minimum score reflects acceptable English language proficiency, institutions face several issues regarding foreign students' language requirements. These issues include understanding the relationship between English proficiency and successful academic outcomes; identifying English proficiency skills necessary for academic success; considering whether critical proficiency levels may vary across disciplines such that a uniform proficiency requirement may be neither possible nor desirable; deciding what is acceptable evidence of adequate English proficiency; considering how other nonlinguistic variables may affect academic performance; ascertaining institutional responsibilities to foreign students who may have less than full English proficiency;

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and establishing the kinds of programs and services that would best serve the needs of the foreign students and satisfy the institution's responsibilities.

This article reviews the literature on which these issues have been evaluated and describes a plan for offering foreign students the ESL assistance deemed necessary to their success as students. The plan focuses on integrating the ESL assistance into the regular academic program and facilitating the mainstreaming process for new foreign students.

English Proficiency as a Predictor of Academic Outcomes

The concern of admissions officers for foreign students' English language proficiency stems from the logical assumption that a minimum threshhold proficiency level is essential to a student's chances for a successful educational experience where the standard language of instruction is English. This observation would be superfluous except for the fact that ascertaining the relationship between initial proficiency and academic outcomes is a necessary step in formulating admissions standards, and that problems with English continue to be a factor that affects classroom performance.

The TOEFL is the most commonly accepted evidence of English language proficiency, although other tests, notably the MTELP, are deemed comparable and are also frequently used by admissions officers. Other kinds of evidence that have been reported as substantiating proficiency are personal interviews, certificates issued by intensive language institutes, high school and college transcripts, and prior attendance at American schools. The obvious problem with these other kinds of evidence is their lack of standardization and comparability.

While the Educational Testing Service, the TOEFL publisher, has cautioned against using TOEFL scores as a predictor of GPA, pointing out that many variables may influence performance and that language proficiency is not a stable trait, other research has shown a relationship between initial language ability as shown by the TOEFL and academic success. A relationship between English ability on entry and academic performance was shown by Payind (1979), who also reported that English language difficulties were identified as an important factor for Afghan and Iranian students. Halasz (1969) found that the English proficiency of students from four Asian countries at the time of admission was related to their grade point averages, and Ayers and Peters (1977) found English proficiency as measured by the TOEFL to be a significant predictor of GPA for certain foreign graduate students. Sharon (1972), on the other hand, found that for foreign students in certain academic majors, the TOEFL was a weaker predictor of success than the GRE-V or GRE-Q.

In addition, certain problems accrue to the use of any standardized tests, particularly for foreign students. Many foreign students are simply unaccustomed to the format of timed multiple-choice tests, and students who demonstrate a high degree of communicative proficiency in actual conversation could not achieve a 500 on the TOEFL. Moreover, Farhady (1979) argued that performance on a given type of test format may be more a function of academic preparation and other variables than of language proficiency, such that reliance on a given type of test might bias against certain classes of students and yield invalid results. Nonetheless, while the evidence is conflicting, sufficient basis exists to use TOEFL performance as a criterion in admission decisions for foreign students.

lish. Angelis, Swinton and Cowell (1979) compared the performance of foreign and domestic students on these three measures and found that the foreign students' performance scores were not only significantly lower, but practically uninterpretable. However, Sharon's study showed that while many foreign students have little verbal aptitude as measured by these tests, they do nevertheless succeed in American graduate schools, and therefore these measures do not have predictive validity.

Institutional Responsibilities

The preceding discussion has shown that while establishing English proficiency requirements for international students constitutes a real problem, both for the student and the institution, no definitive research has been forthcoming to guide administrators in defining proficiency standards, weighting predictors, or identifying acceptable indicators of proficiency. Very likely, it will never be possible to have total confidence in any proficiency indicator, nor to discern the point at which language limitations, as opposed to a host of other factors, impinge on a given student's chances for success. Despite all this, it is necessary to find some basis of policy making that will discharge the university's responsibilities to its various constituencies.

Administrators find themselves in a situation of establishing policies that are at least in part arbitrary and which are bound to strike some as unfair. But policies, while imperfect, are never generated gratuitously but in response to needs and pressures. One source of pressure is the administrator's perennial (yet friendly) adversary, the faculty, who are as demanding of quality from their students as students are demanding of quality from their professors. Pro-

fessors often demand greater homogeneity among their students in regard to a minimum performance level including English proficiency, to make their own job of teaching easier. Too often, professors mistake a foreign accent or problems with certain aspects of English grammar (e.g., the notorious English article) for a general lack of English language ability. Again, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate out the extent to which language itself is a barrier from simple difficulty with course material. Faculty who bring pressure upon the administration to "do something" about the perceived inability of many foreign students to perform comparably to their domestic peers constitute a major constituency to which administration is responsible in defining policy.

Another source of pressure comes from other students and the parents of students who are enrolled in lecture sections taught by foreign teaching assistants. In awarding research and teaching assistantships to graduate students, departments often reserve the former for the more capable students who are seen as having greater potential to contribute to the department's research interests. Consequently, the relatively less able—and many foreign students, because of language differences, are perceived as such—are assigned teaching duties in large lecture sections. As a result, undergraduates often have valid cause to complain that their T.A.'s do not speak English well enough to be understood. Hinofotis and Bailey (1981) summarized the concerns of communication problems between domestic students and foreign T.A.'s. Administrative policy decisions must therefore take into account the needs and interests of the study body at large.

The third constituency to which administration is responsible is the foreign student body, who may rightfully expect that the university will do everything

Identifying Proficiency Levels

Language proficiency levels are difficult, if not impossible, to define operationally except in terms of scores on the accepted tests. An overall score on the TOEFL is frequently taken as an indicator of adequate general proficiency, although the cutoff for admission may vary according to graduate and undergraduate level and the type of institution.

It is also possible that more refined judgments of proficiency levels in the different language skills—listening, reading, speaking and writing—may be necessary to identify meaningful minimum performance standards. Johns (1981) found that faculty in different disciplines differed in their perceptions of the importance of the skills within their programs. Generally, the receptive skills in the different modes were perceived as more crucial to academic performance than were the productive skills. Farhady (1982) also reported that students in different disciplines, as well as students from different backgrounds, performed at different levels according to the type of language test administered. This may imply that different skills are indeed differentially important to disciplines, and that a single proficiency indicator would not be adequate for admissions criteria. Ideally, therefore, separate tests should be devised and administered for the various departments to which foreign students apply. This obviously would be prohibitive because of constraints on time and resources; too many different tests would have to be developed, administered, and interpreted.

Another major difficulty in establishing a minimum proficiency level for admission lies in the fact that there is no certainty as to what is really meant by language proficiency other than by subjective judgment on the part of a native or nearnative evaluator

or a score on an acceptable test. There is no objective criterion that can be pointed to as the body of language knowledge or skills that is truly indicative of the ability to use English at the college level. Anyone who has taught freshman composition knows that even native speakers vary widely in their abilities to use English effectively.

The question of what really constitutes English ability commensurate with the demands of college work, and how to measure it, is yet unanswered. Clark (1977) found that college-bound American high school students' scores on an experimental administration of the TOEFL were so much higher than those of a group of representative foreign students that the lower end of the native-speaker distribution overlapped with the upper end of the foreign student distribution. Obviously, the native speakers' chances for college success could not be predicted on the basis of their TOEFL scores; they all scored high and within a narrow range, but it would be reasonable that among those students there will not be great homogeneity in their college outcomes. And it is to be expected that many of the foreign examinees who scored well below the lowest native speaker on the TOEFL will have good academic outcomes. Therefore, TOEFL scores cannot be considered an absolute criterion to measure whether a foreign applicant has the English skills necessary to compete successfully with native speakers.

The issue of performance standards in comparison to native speakers raises the question of whether foreign students might need the same language skills as their domestic peers, given that they are competing on the same material in the same classrooms. The adequacy of native speakers' language ability for college work is measured by such instruments as the SAT-V, the GRE-V, and the Test of Standard Written Eng-

in its power to assure them the best possible quality education, for which they often pay substantial tuition. These kinds of pressures require that policy decisions be made regarding the admissibility of foreign applicants, and several alternatives present themselves.

Admission Policy Alternatives

The first possible alternative would be simply not to admit foreign students. In fact, in times when tight budgetary restrictions force a limit on the number of students that can be accepted to state-supported institutions, there is some pressure from the community to adopt just such a policy. It is argued that if spaces are limited, they should be allotted to those persons whose taxes finance education, or to their children. This philosophical perspective would eliminate the admission of foreign students and possibly out-of-state domestic students as well. Although viable from the economic and political standpoints, this alternative is unacceptable from an educational perspective. Not only do many foreign students possess tremendous talents and potential for making enormous contributions to the educational setting, they also bring a diversity to otherwise homogeneous, even provincial, campuses and serve as a source of learning by challenging domestic students with novel points of view and diverse cultural traditions.

Adoption of a policy of not admitting foreign students would not satisfy the administration's obligations to any of its constituencies. While professors would have the homogeneous student body in terms of the language proficiency that they often demand, it would be at the sacrifice of many excellent minds and the many other benefits foreign students can bring to their departments. Likewise, the tradeoff for un-

dergraduate students in general would not be advantageous. While some lecture sections might end up being better taught, the overall learning environment would suffer a loss.

A second policy alternative is to accept only those foreign students who meet the most stringent language proficiency requirements, for example, a TOEFL score of 600, or a certain number of years of successful coursework in another American college or university. Such a policy would automatically exclude the majority of foreign students traditionally deemed fluent enough for admission. Moreover, such an approach would ensure that many very capable students, and students whose proficiency would quickly increase, would be denied admission or even discouraged from applying at all.

The third alternative is to continue to accept students whose proficiency may be questionable but who otherwise show the sort of academic promise looked for in the admissions process. These are students who have demonstrated that they have at least the minimum threshhold English proficiency level and also possess the other characteristics, such as good transcripts, successful attendance at U.S. institutions, etc., that are more indicative of the potential for success than the language proficiency scores alone. Having made the commitment to continue to accept such students, the institution must also make a policy commitment to ensure that all necessary support services are made available to them.

This third alternative seems most rational as it provides the best benefits possible to both the institution and the foreign students. The question that yet needs to be resolved is what form of programmatic assistance can be provided to meet the institution's obligation to its foreign students.

Program Models

Having decided that foreign applicants who demonstrate a minimum proficiency level should be admitted, college administrators must then decide the nature and extent of services to be provided to those students for whom the English language itself still presents a problem. Several models can be considered, and the one chosen will be a function of the number of students in question, resources available, and the degree of commitment of the institution itself.

One option is the sink-or-swim approach, by which foreign students who demonstrate the minimum proficiency, by whatever criteria are institutionally established (e.g., 500 score on TOEFL), are admitted but are given no extraordinary support from the institution. Students are on their own to seek out additional assistance in the form of tutoring, self study, or whatever. The potential consequences of this approach are obvious: tremendous frustration, dropping out, and the loss of many bright students who could have gained from and contributed much to the educational environment. Nor does this approach in any way satisfy the kinds of institutional responsibilities previously discussed.

Maxwell (1974) suggested several remedies that a college could promote to help the students with language problems. She listed allowing the use of dictionaries during exams, granting longer time allotments for taking essay exams, sensitizing professors to the particular needs of foreign students, and encouraging peer tutoring. This is a very humanitarian approach, well fitted to the small liberal arts college whose primary mission is the education of the individual and characterized by personalized education. It assumes altruism and volunteerism, plus the capacity of an institution to coordinate individualized ser-

vices. For those very reasons, it is not likely a model that could be implementable at a large research institution. And it does not, in fact, represent any institutional policy, however beneficial and laudable its aim and outcomes. Failing the total cooperation of all affected constituencies of the college community, the institutional responsibilities would still not be met.

A transitional model would provide prematriculation ESL institutes for all foreign students or for those below a specified proficiency level. Under this model, those students who qualify for admission under the minimum proficiency criterion undergo further testing and are placed in intensive English courses according to test results. Before being allowed to register for regular college coursework, they must attain a required proficiency level or spend a specified amount of time in the intensive program. Such institutes entail additional fees and may thus constitute a financial burden to many students. A further drawback is that many students, while needing the additional English, could still successfully undertake a limited courseload of college work, and are thus prevented from making timely progress toward their degrees. This, too, may cause a great deal of frustration on the part of a great many students who are eager to get on with their chosen study areas.

A fourth option, one that addresses the needs of all constituencies, is a modified version of the transitional model which allows both for intensive English instruction and progress in a degree program simultaneously. Under this modified transitional model, applicants who meet the minimum entrance criteria have their language weaknesses diagnosed by further testing, with other moderator variables being considered, to determine an appropriate placement in remedial courses. They are allowed to pursue regular college

studies while also studying English. In this way, the use of English as a medium of study reinforces language acquisition complementarily to formal study in an institute setting.

Several benefits accrue in using this model. One is the transitional period it allows for students not ready for fulltime coursework but who may not need fulltime intensive work. Also, if such a program is tied to a graduate-level TEFL or TESL program, it provides a laboratory setting where student trainees can gain experience under professional supervision.

The Modified Transitional Model

The modified transitional model has been implemented at the University of Washington after an evolution of various approaches under constant evaluation and represents those aspects of each evolutionary step that best took account of the kinds of concerns that have been discussed so far, addressing the needs of all affected university constituencies yet without making further demands on limited financial resources in a time of retrenchment. The remainder of this article describes the program and explains the ways in which it has satisfied the demands of administration, faculty, taxpayers, and the foreign students themselves.

Based on an internal study of foreign students at the University of Washington, the institution was led to the conclusion that a TOEFL score of 500 was evidence of adequate basic proficiency for admission contingent on further assessment and possible ESL work, while persons with a score of 580 could be presumed to have sufficient English skill to enter directly into a fulltime English-medium curriculum. The corresponding MTELP scores were 30 and 90, respectively. This level was applied for both graduate and un-

dergraduate applicants. While the TOEFL score of 500 or a MTELP of 80 was deemed indicative of at least threshhold English ability, many of the academic problems of foreign students with these scores can still be traced to inadequate English skills. Those foreign students with TOEFL scores of 580 or better or MTELP scores over 90 generally have not found language to be a handicap. The occasional exceptions have been few enough to give confidence in these guidelines. Therefore, the 500-579 or 80-89 range of scores represents those students who have caused admissions officers the worry of whether to admit or not to admit, other academic qualifications being equal. Therefore, the policy has become to admit foreign students who academically qualify for admission but whose TOEFL or MTELP scores fall in those ranges on a conditional basis, with the requirement that further diagnostic and placement testing occur prior to actual matriculation and mandatory participation in ESL classes according to the problems diagnosed. When such applicants are notified of their acceptance to the University of Washington, they are informed of these conditions. When the conditions are met, the provisional admission status is eliminated.

With this notification, foreign students are also advised that an additional fee (in an amount computed to generate sufficient funds to employ the course instructor based on an assumed enrollment of approximately 15 students each section) is assessed for each ESL course into which they may be placed. This allows them to budget for that contingency. The assessing of additional fees addresses two of the concerns that have been discussed: coupled with the higher tuition already charged nonresident and foreign students, it helps to placate those taxpayers who complain about foreign students occupying slots that could have been held by state residents; and it makes the ESL program

self sustaining and eases budgetary demands, allowing a service to be provided that does not compete with other services for scarce funds. To minimize the negative effect of this additional charge on foreign students, they are able to reduce their regular University courses to that of a parttime student, thus reducing their regular tuition. Because the ESL courses are considered to be remedial in nature, they do not carry credit toward graduation; they do, however, count toward fulltime enrollment and thus satisfy F-1 visa requirements. Fees generated by the surcharge cover costs of instruction and materials. The only costs charged to the state general fund are those of the professors who oversee the program.

The actual course content of the ESL classes and the extent of the requirement will depend on criteria identified by local institutions implementing the model. The experience at the University of Washington has shown that a two-track program with separate emphases on listening skills in one and reading and writing skills in the other is necessary. Local research findings have been consistent with the general research about the various language subskills in that listening is most clearly distinct and requires specialized courses. But the severest deficiencies have been identified in writing, which is a crucial skill in many academic departments, particularly for graduate students. This two-track approach allows for concentration on diagnosed weaknesses, and within each track there are different proficiency levels to allow a given student to receive as much or as little remediation as his or her case requires.

The incorporation of the ESL program into a recognized disciplinary setting is key to the success of any such program. At the University of Washington, the program is housed under the English Department's MATESL program. In other institutions, it might be

housed under Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, Education, or whatever department sponsors a graduate-level TESL program. This accomplishes two purposes: it ensures that persons teaching the classes have a theoretical base in ESL instruction, and it provides a laboratory setting for application of those theoretical principles. An additional advantage is that it legitimizes the undertaking as a valid University-level program and raises the field of English as a Second Language to a recognized speciality area of instruction, a difficulty commonly experienced by teaching experts in the discipline.

While this modified transitional approach to providing foreign students the ESL assistance they need so as to successfully compete in an English-medium instructional context may not be adaptable to all institutions of higher education, it does meet the primary needs of all the diverse constituencies affected. It is self supporting, yet because of the flexibility given students to reduce their normal academic loads to parttime, in financial terms it is not excessively onerous on them. It does not drain resources from the state budget for specially helping nonstate residents, satisfying the government and all the other institutional groups competing for those scarce resources. It systematically increases English reading and writing ability, pleasing faculty, and increases oral communication abilities, pleasing students who may have such foreign students as teaching assistants.

Most importantly, this approach permits institutions to admit foreign students based on their proven academic abilities. Once it is shown that the student meets the minimum threshhold level for entrance, other decisions are made on prior academic performance grounds. By such a system, the University provides admitted students the ESL assistance they need in a program integrated into the regular University

structure, avoiding the isolation that can occur in intensive institute structure, simultaneously providing the institution as a whole the benefits of a widely diversified student body.

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